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May/June Focus

Nonprogram tobacco

Concerns abound over genetically modified tobacco.

By Rocky Womack

Genetically modified tobacco worries industry leaders who are afraid this nonprogram tobacco will scare off export customers.

In February, Vector Tobacco Ltd. of Timberlake, N.C., petitioned the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) for a decision on deregulating the company's Vector 21-41 variety. Vector 21-41 is a registered variety of Type 31V, which is a genetically modified burley variety with reduced nicotine content.

APHIS accepted comments on the petition until April 15. On March 29, the Leaf Tobacco Exporters Association, the trade association for companies that export most all U.S. flue-cured and burley leaf, sent a letter to U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman requesting that APHIS hold off on a decision about Vector Tobacco's petition.

"We are not concerned about the tobacco itself," says Tommy Bunn, executive vice president of the Leaf Tobacco Exporters Association. "Our customers have said, 'We don't want genetically modified tobacco.'"

Bunn believes if genetically modified tobacco is commingled with traditionally grown tobacco, the export market for traditional will diminish for U.S. growers. That alarms leaf exporters, because the export market is the future for American-grown tobacco. Many foreign customers use American blends in their cigarette brands, and this market has potential to expand as more international customers start using American leaf blends in their products.

The loss of that market would be detrimental. "European and Asian customers would no longer be interested in doing business with us," Bunn says.

Commingling the tobaccos would play havoc on the overseas market for American leaf. Germany and Japan also import a lot of U.S. burley tobaccos. "We're trying to figure out what we need to do with this issue," says Dean Wallace, executive director of the Council for Burley Tobacco in Lexington, Ky. "It's a very complex issue."

Wallace has met with farm bureaus and tobacco cooperatives to address this issue. He says they believe genetically modified tobacco should remain

regulated by APHIS until they can establish some production and handling guidelines that satisfy and assure foreign customers.

"It's not a fight against Vector or GMO [genetically modified organisms]," Wallace says. "We're not trying to stop GMO. I don't think you can do that. Personally, I think GMO tobacco will be accepted in the United States."

IN AGREEMENT

Vector Tobacco doesn't dispute that the loss of foreign customers would harm the traditional market and doesn't advocate mixing genetically modified tobacco with traditionally grown tobacco.

"If you pumped the nicotine up, it could be trouble for us," says Bill Maksymowicz, director of the company's tobacco programs and agronomy. "We don't want anybody else mixing or commingling with us."

The worry by leaders in the traditionally grown tobacco circles isn't just about tobacco produced in the field. Cured tobacco is a concern, too. Bunn says nothing prevents a grower who owns quota from selling genetically modified tobacco—even though it is nonprogram tobacco—at auction. That tobacco could go under loan in the Flue-Cured Tobacco Cooperative Stabilization Corp. and contaminate loan stocks of traditional tobacco, Bunn says, and nobody would know it contained genetic modifications unless the tobacco was tested.

Rick Coyte, vice president of leaf operations for Vector Tobacco, says if its growers sell this nonprogram tobacco on the auction floor, they are breaking their contract and breaking the law. As company growers, they must deliver the genetically modified tobacco to the leaf dealer or manufacturer that they are raising it for.

ESTABLISH GUIDELINES

In the letter written to Veneman, leaf exporters believe that APHIS must continue its regulation of Vector 21-41 so traditionally grown tobacco can maintain its integrity, quality and value throughout the world. Leaf exporters also believe that delaying a decision on Vector Tobacco's request will give the tobacco industry time to establish production procedures for genetically modified tobacco and evaluate Vector 21-41 under various growing conditions.

Maksymowicz says Vector Tobacco encourages its growers to top tobacco at the bud stage, so no problems will occur with cross-pollination of genetically modified tobacco with traditionally grown tobacco.

That doesn't ease the worry of U.S. growers who wonder how Vector Tobacco can raise nonprogram tobacco. Maksymowicz says the company's genetically modified tobacco contains less than 0.8 percent nicotine. In early April, the U.S. Farm Service Agency (FSA) was working on a proposal to send to the *Federal Register*. The proposal asked for public comment on whether Type 31V should be program or nonprogram tobacco starting in 2003.

After the public comment period (usually slightly less than or slightly more than 30 days), FSA will determine whether to treat Type 31V as program or nonprogram tobacco. For the 2002 growing season, Type 31V will remain nonprogram tobacco, despite the outcome of the public comment in 2002.

As of April 30, FSA hadn't issued a specific date when the proposal would be sent to the *Federal Register*. --FCTF

Vector Tobacco Biography

Vector Tobacco Ltd. is located in Timberlake, N.C., and also maintains a research facility in Durham, N.C.

Between 600 and 650 farmers raise the company's genetically modified tobacco in Pennsylvania, Louisiana, Mississippi, Illinois, Iowa and Hawaii. They grow Vector 21-41, a registered variety of Type 31V, which is a genetically modified burley variety with less than 0.8 percent nicotine whose parent is the Burley 21 LA (low alkaloid) variety.

Growers in Pennsylvania transplant burley in early May through early to mid-June. Louisiana growers transplant flue-cured in early April, and Mississippi growers transplant flue-cured in mid-April. Illinois growers transplant burley from about May 10 to late May. Iowa growers transplant burley in late May to early June. Hawaii growers can transplant flue-cured three times a year: mid-January; mid-March to early April; and late June to early August. Vector Tobacco is also raising test crops in Argentina, Mexico, Africa and Canada.

Vector Tobacco's flue-cured growers cure their crop using rack and box barns equipped with heat exchangers. Burley growers hang their air-cured crop on high-tensile-wire curing structures.

The company pays growers \$1.50 per pound to raise genetically modified tobacco for its future reduced-nicotine cigarette, Quest.

Vector Tobacco already has a reduced-carcinogen cigarette called Omni on the market. The four groups of carcinogens that have been reduced in Omni are polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), tobacco specific nitrosamines (TSNAs), volatile organics and gases, and phenolic compounds, including catechol. The company purchases the tobacco for this cigarette from leaf dealers. The tobacco is shipped in enclosed trucks from the field to Vector Tobacco's manufacturing and processing facility in Timberlake.

The Omni cigarette entered the marketplace in November 2001. Quest is scheduled to go on the market during the third quarter (September, October, November) of 2002. Rick Coyte, vice president of leaf operations for Vector Tobacco, says he isn't concerned about the public's acceptance of its genetically modified product. In the past and currently, foreign customers have voiced their concerns over genetically modified products, but Quest won't be initially introduced in the European and Asian markets. It is primed for the U.S. market.

"The time is right for the product," says Bill Maksymowicz, director of the company's tobacco programs and agronomy. He says Vector Tobacco will react to customers' needs and concerns about genetically modified tobacco. He says acceptance of genetically modified products will come either from a change in attitudes or a major disease epidemic worldwide that will probably create acceptance based on need.

Acceptance "will just take time," Maksymowicz says. But genetically modified products "are not going away." --R.W.

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